DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 350 609 CS 213 542

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TITLE What Happens to Children's Drawing?
PUB DATE Mar 92
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Spring Conference of the National Council of Teachers of English (Washington, DC, March 26-28, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Childrens Art; *Freehand Drawing; Grade 1; Kindergarten; Parent Influence; Primary Education; *Student Attitudes; Student Motivation; *Writing Attitudes; Writing Research
IDENTIFIERS *Childrens Drawings; New York City Board of Education

ABSTRACT

A study investigated why children's drawing becomes less flexible and less exploratory as the children age. Subjects, 92 students in two kindergarten and two first grade classrooms in two different public schools in Queens, New York, were interviewed about their feelings concerning drawing and writing. Each classroom was visited for 1 week each. Results indicated that: (1) all children had crayons and pencils available at home, but most had only lined paper available; (2) parents often gave positive comments about their children's drawing, but not about their children's writing; (3) 87% of the kindergarteners and 80% of the first graders said drawing was more fun than writing; (4) 72% of the kindergarteners and 77% of the first graders felt drawing was easier than writing; (5) 77% of the first graders and 54% of the kindergarteners agreed that drawing is faster than writing; and (6) 84% of the kindergarteners and 86% of the first graders selected writing as more important than drawing. Findings suggest that adults need to supply more of the "messy" materials to encourage experimentation in drawing; parents need to draw more in front of their children; parents must communicate that they care about writing in positive ways; and teachers must value drawing and convince parents of its importance. Children see drawing as a "baby" skill, which helps explain the loss of freshness and spontaneity in their art when they learn to write. (RS)

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# What Happens to Children's Drawing?

Paper presented at the National Council of Teachers of English
Spring Conference, Washington, D. C., March 26-28, 1992
in the session, "Keeping the Arts in the Language Arts"

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## What Happens to Children's Drawing?

Andrea's first grade teacher suggests that she draw her Halloween story so she can think about what she is going to write. And Andrea revises her drawing to help her compose her story (Calkins, 1986). Kurt draws a treasure chest under the ocean and a diver looking for the chest. He adds a shark and gives the diver a spear. As he augments and revises his story, he discovers new directions and dimensions which he will use when he writes (Palmer and Coon, 1984). When Lucy Calkins asks five-year-old Chris what he is going to write, he responds, "How should I know. I haven't drawed it yet" (1986, pp. 47-50).

That young children find support for writing in drawing does not surprise us. Professionals involved with pupils in the early grades see drawing and writing working together every day. However, they also note a documented loss of freshness and spontaneity in children's drawings as they get older. Howard Gardner writes that when drawings made by seven- and eight-year-old children are juxtaposed with those made by younger children, a striking contrast emerges. "Works by older children feature a kind of precision, a concern for detail, a command of geometrical form which are lacking in the attempts by younger artists. Yet, one can't help but feel something vital which is present at the age of six has disappeared" (1980, p. 143). He later calls this missing quality "a certain freedom, flexibility or exploratory behavior."

Because the freedom found in drawing allows exploratory behavior at the time of learning to write, young children's

understandings of drawing and writing at this time are crucial to our teaching and for our parenting. What messages about drawing and writing are children receiving from parents, siblings, teachers, and society at large? In particular, why does the life spirit in many children's artwork diminish as they become older.

Clearly some busy live children are needed. We shall aim at the early grades because the interactions between drawing and writing are intense during these years, and because we can explore Gardner's contention that vitality in children's artwork diminishes after age six.

The Schools

Two kindergartens and two first grades in two different public schools in Queens, New York were visited. Because it was June, most of the children were six or seven years of age.

All four classes, 92 children, began the school day with group language experience stories which they composed. They watched the teacher write, and they read. The kindergartens had writing centers which the children could visit at center time, and the kindergartens had made class and individual books for the reading centers. The first graders had writing folders and collections of individually made books.

The four teachers encouraged the children to write. They advised the children to independently think out their spellings, say the words slowly and write what they hear, consult each other, and look in the dictionary. While the teachers emphasized the best formation of letters, they consistently accepted invented spellings.

Procedure

Each class was visited for one week each. Interviews were conducted one child at a time in the classroom or in the hall, depending on the teachers' preference. The members of one kindergarten and one first grade were interviewed in their classrooms, and the members of one kindergarten and one first grade were interviewed in the hall.

The children were told that their feelings about drawing and writing were needed so that grow-ups could be helped to see "their vision from their point of view" (Malinowski, 1922, p. 25). The interviewers emphasised feelings and opinions to help minimize the adult-child and right-answer phenomena Hatch (1990) describes when having young children as informants.

Interviewers first simply went through a checklist to see which materials the children might have at home, which people they saw draw or write at home, and what happened to their drawings or writings at home. Next, they asked the children whether they felt drawing or writing was more fun and why, easier and why, faster and why, and finally more important and why.

Results

When asked about drawing and writing supplies at home, all children had crayons and pencils which they could easily obtain. Most children had paper available, although the paper was more often lined. Three students had only coloring books. Pens were often reserved for the adults in the household. Many children had markers, but they commented on the constant need to cover the tops and to avoid getting the colors on themselves. One kindergartener commented that he did not have markers, but his father did because his father liked to color.

Most children saw their parents write, but few saw them draw. Older siblings were consistently mentioned as drawing and liking to draw. The children who had siblings more often had sisters, so older sisters more often provided models of drawing. The children with younger siblings complained that their siblings interferred with their drawing and writing by grabbing their papers or taking their colors.

Parents often gave positive comments about the children's drawings and hung up their pictures, saved them in drawers, or took them to work. Only a very few parents said or did nothing when the children showed them their drawings. However, fewer parents gave positive comments on the children's writing. Parents were more often cited as correcting their writing, in particular on their homework. One kindergarten boy said his mother shouted at him when he made the letters wrong, and one first grade boy commented that his parents beat him because he never got his spelling words right. Very few parents saved their children's writing and three parents threw their children's schoolwork away in front of them.

Fun

When asked whether drawing or writing was more fun, 87% of the kindergarteners and 80% of the first graders said drawing. Asked why drawing was more fun, aesthetics dominated: "You get to use colors," "Drawing takes lots of stuff," and "I like to look at it." Next their replies focused on content ("I can draw my family"), sociability ("You get to show pictures to people"), and enjoyment ("You can make people and flowers to make you smile").

Those children who favored writing as more fun said that writing explained their drawings and named similar characteristics in content ("I can talk about my family at the park"), sociability ("I get to read

my stories to people"), and enjoyment ("I can tell the story of my great weekend"). One first grader said he liked both drawing and writing because, "When I draw a man, the man looks funny. When I write a man, I make a fun story."

Ease

72% of the kindergarteners and 77% of the first graders felt drawing was easier in terms of concept. One first grader affirmed, "Just make a face. You have a picture." A kindergartener said simply, "You put a square and a triangle. You know shapes. You got a picture." The children felt that crayons and markers were easier to use than pencils repeating, "You just push," "You don't push hard," "Nothing breaks." The management of the implement was easier in drawing. One kindergartener commented, "With drawing, I don't worry how I hold anything."

While talking about the ease of drawing, the children commented on the difficulty of writing, "If you don't work, no one can read it." Six students mentioned that writing made them physically tired and hurt their hands. The greatest roadblock to writing was spelling. One kindergartener sighed, "If you don't know the words, you worry." A first grader compared the processes by stating, "If I draw a rainbow, it's easy. If I have to write 'rainbow', it's hard."

The children who supported writing as easier commented on the flow of the process for them, "I just think about it and it comes." This group felt happy about pencils. A first grader commented, "You can erase writing. If you make a mistake in a picture, you need a whole 'nother piece of paper." Three students identified drawing with younger children saying, "Drawing is for kids who don't know how to write yet."

Speed

The speed of drawing and writing was the only area in which the majority of the first and second graders did not agree. 77% of the first graders but only 54% of the kindergarteners concurred with the pupil who said, "You can draw fast. It's too hard to speed up writing." Quantity also added to the difference in perspective. One first grader observed, "Drawing is faster because it's one page. Writing is always more pages." A classmate confirmed, "You draw one picture. You can make another. By the time I finish a book, I'm too tired to do another."

While the children cited spelling, holding the implement, and thinking as slowing down writing, interestingly 44% of the kindergarteners thought writing was faster. They loved pencils and felt that pencils were faster to use than crayons. They said they could write small to speed up the process. When asked if they could not draw smaller too, they replied that it was too time consuming to draw small.

Importance

84% of the kindergarteners and 86% of the first graders selected writing as more important, citing what writing could do for people such as letters, party invitations, cards, and parent notes to teachers. It was also important because it was needed for school, homework, grades, and spelling. One kindergartener stated, "You need writing in school, but you need writing as a grown up to keep your job."

Eleven children commented that writing was important because it was learned and it help you learn. When asked what they learned, the children listed words, spelling, and stories. They felt they could write stories that could be read, and two first graders hoped they would become famous authors. One first grader said, "Writing tells

things people don't know. You get ideas. You can make books. There are already books that tell about 45 million years ago. You can make more books." Another first grader stated that, "With writing you concentrate. It makes your head more better. Thinking is good for you."

Implications

1. Adults need to supply more of the messy materials that encourage experimentation in drawing and writing and to tolerate mess. Unlined paper, markers, and paints were the least available materials in the children's homes. Lined paper is associated with school writing and notions of correctness. Unlined and lined paper, paper of different shapes and colors, and stapled blank books need to be available to children. Washable markers are on the market, and children can learn to cover markers. The children mentioned over and over that colors were used for drawing. Not one child mentioned that writing could be done in color and on color. Yet creativity in writing increases when writing in color. If more kinds of materials were available to children, they could discover this possibility.

2. Parents need to draw more in front of their children and not only when asked. Such a demand is of course difficult for parents working two and three jobs, overwhelmed by management of family life, and insecure in their own abilities to draw. However, teacher encouragement through workshops and letters about materials and the recruitment of other models such as older siblings, could provide the kind of saturation in drawing that some households experience in writing.

3. Parents must communicate that they care about writing in positive ways. Drills, tension, and physical punishment are no

ways to encourage writing in children. Teachers are becoming more flexible in their acceptance of children's invented spellings and attempts at authorship. Such flexibility must be communicated to parents. Moreover, parents must realize that writings can also be displayed. Notes and stories can rest on walls, and handmade books can become part of home libraries. If writing is to be valued for school success, it must be valued at home in ways that do not communicate drudgery.

4. Teachers must value drawing and convince parents of its importance. Many parents displayed their children's drawings. They put them on refrigerators and walls, saved them in folders and drawers, and took them to work. However, the children understood that while their drawings were "nice" and "pretty" they were decorations and as such limited in use. The three students who commented that "Drawing is for kids who can't write yet," are expressing educational and societal values which encourage writing but diminish drawing.

Of all the results of these exploratory interviews, their comment presents the most serious warning to teachers and parents. These children see drawing as a baby skill which is eventually dropped. This notion helps explain the loss of freshness and spontaneity that Gardner observed in children's art at the time of learning to write. Having picked up on academic views that art is an extra with no function except to help writing along, children become formulaic in its practice. This sentiment is echoed in teacher comments as well.

Discussion

Bridge documents teachers around her who say at one extreme, "I have a couple of kinds who aren't doing anything--all they do is draw," and say at the other extreme, "My students don't need to draw anymore they just write" (1985, p. 195). Calkins (1986) writes that in the beginning drawing leads children into writing and but once writing abilities are established, drawing falls to second place.

Yet as children move in maturity from an understanding of whole to part, they must perceive how the parts they master relate to the whole. This ability to see and understand relationships is due to a developed sense of perspective. Older children who struggle with writing and reading often fail to grasp the interconnectedness of these processes or their connectedness to speaking and drawing. Drawing pulls fragments together. Art stimulates a child's natural curiosity and may even literally expand the capacity of the brain (Williams, 1977). Academic programs that permit flexibiility in art can demonstrate improvement in traditional academic subjects when school pressure for accuracy and form become overwhelming. Williams describes Chris, who was passing elementary school without reading or understanding math concepts. She enrolled in the Mead School in fourth grade and did almost nothing but artwork her first year. She developed a passion for math and her math grades improved. Her other grades improved and by the end of sixth grade, she tested in seventh and eighth grade levels in all subjects. As a high school senior she got all A's and B's and was headed toward a career in art (1977, p. 16).

Competency in one area of learning increases the potential for learning in other areas. Researchers who have chronicled stages in the development of drawing in young children emphasize the connection between the ability to create basic gestalts in art and the ability to read quickly and well (Goodnow, 1977; Kellogg, 1967). Marie Clay (1986) states that learning to read and write creates links between known linguistic features and real world events. She emphasizes that this constructive mode is one we must develop by requiring each child to link the current task to personal knowledge. She recounts in amazement the day in New Zealand an American speaker classified arts and crafts as non-academic.

Other educators also argue that art is a core educational process, and that through art children learn how to learn. Drawing is not just coloring and making things, but "part of the serious business of making meaning--partners with words for communicating our inner designs" (Hubbard, 1989, p. 157).

Thus, drawing has inherent value and deserves to grow, live, and contribute to every aspect of our lives. If we continue to see drawing only in its ability to acquire writing, we limit children's ability to make a totality out of the aspects of their worlds. To diminish value and to limit cohesion have no place in learning.

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